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TAGS: PHUM PREL TU ADANA

SUBJECT: TURKEY - SE TURKEY UNSETTLED BY LARGE PEACEFUL PROTESTS OF ANTI-ISLAMIC CARTOONS.

REF: A) ADANA 27 B) ADANA 29

1.(SBU) Summary: Southeastern Turkey's largely Sunni population has taken considerable offense at the recently published Danish editorial cartoons. One American Christian in Gaziantep has reported non-violent police harassment; the Gaziantep police chief undertook to look into the matter and told us he is focused on protecting Americans. Overall, authorities have advised restraint and, by and large, have been effective at managing large protest activities with the potential for violent outbursts. End Summary.

Protests peak after Friday prayer~.

2.(SBU) Last week saw frequent outbursts of public criticism of the recently published Danish editorial cartoons in southeast Turkey, culminating in post Friday prayer protests and demonstrations. In total, tens of thousands of peaceful protesters were out on Friday in Adana, Diyarbakir, Sanliurfa, Siirt, Mardin and Mersin provinces, according to multiple reports from local sources and the press. The largest protest was held in Diyarbakir and, according to conservative estimates from local contacts, was 30-40,000 strong and stretched over three kilometers in length. In Adana, Consulate personnel observed a 500-person protest group which formed after Friday prayer at the Sabanci central mosque. Protestors in the region reportedly denounced Denmark, the U.S., Israel and Europe, burned Danish flags and chanted pro-Islamic slogans. Nevertheless, protests stayed non-violent and Turkish National Police deployed adequate riot control units to control crowd behavior.

An AMCIT Christian caught up in the regional tension?

3.(SBU) AMCON Adana received complaints from an AMCIT resident of Gaziantep on February 7 reporting Turkish police harassment. At the AMCIT's request, we approached Gaziantep Security Director Dr. Ali Yilmaz about the complaint. He said that the AMCIT and "his visiting friends," while publicly proselytizing near a mosque, had angered many devout Islamic local residents. He said that proselytizing was not a violation of Turkish law, offered that he would investigate the allegation of harassment and claimed that he was focusing on protecting the small number of American residents in Gaziantep

Regional non-Sunnis riding out storm, but wary

4.(SBU) AMCON Adana has polled Christian and other non-Sunni groups to determine how their small communities are faring; we have encountered general concern, but also widespread relief that there has been little violence targeting them to date. An exception is the small Syriac Christian community of a handful of families in Elazig whose church was stoned on February 8. The larger Syriac community in Mardin province fared better, but took precautions, such as not sending children to school on Friday, February 10 and staying off the streets on Thursday and Friday, February 9-10 when protests were anticipated. The Diyarbakir Christian Church reported that it was not the focus of any protest or harassment last week, but noted considerable community tension about the editorial cartoon controversy. In Adana, police have been patrolling near several small storefront evangelical churches since the January attack on a Christian pastor. We have heard no reports of recent violence. Small Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches in Hatay and Mersin report no weekend violence either.

5.(SBU) Comment: Southeast Turkey's largely Islamic and very devout population is angered and offended by the Danish and Norwegian editorials which, they say, defame the Prophet Mohammed. Regional non-Sunnis claim that they see a storm unfolding around them and, while it is non-violent to date, are remaining wary because they do not yet see when the storm will blow over. End Comment.

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